DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 751 TM 034 428

TITLE	Smart Start Action Plan.
INSTITUTION	Arkansas State Dept. of Education, Little Rock.
PUB DATE	2001-12-01
NOTE	8p.; For a description of the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment and Accountability program, see TM 034 427. For the Action Plan for the Smart Step initiative, see TM 034 429.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.arkedu.state.ar.us/ actaap.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Achievement Tests; *Educational Planning; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; State Programs; *Strategic Planning; *Testing Programs
IDENTIFIERS	Action Plans; *Arkansas

ABSTRACT

This Action Plan has been developed to ensure the success of the Arkansas Smart Start Initiative, the part of the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment and Accountability Program (ACTAAP) that focuses on grades K through 4. As do other aspects of the ACTAAP, the Smart Start Initiative has four components, each of which is described here: (1) standards that are clear statements of what students should know and do, supported by benchmarks and curriculum models; (2) professional development opportunities; (3) student assessment that requires administration of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests; and (4) accountability as a focused and comprehensive process to improve student learning. Accountability as part of the Smart Start Initiative is constructed around a three-tiered system of statewide indicators, individual school improvement indicators, and a locally generated school accountability narrative. Funding supports available to schools with high numbers of low-income students are described. (SLD)

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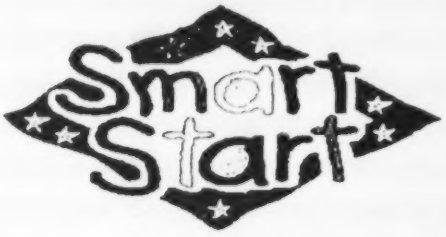

Action Plan

This action plan was developed by the Arkansas Department of Education to ensure the maximum success of the Smart Start Initiative, and to address other issues contained within the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment, and Accountability Program (ACTAAP).

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Revised
December 1, 2001

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Smart Start Action Plan

Standards

The Language Arts and Mathematics Frameworks are revised on a regular schedule to reflect current research, provide clarity, and to ensure that all student learning expectations are measurable.

Two documents, designed for educators, support implementation of the Frameworks.

1. Sample Benchmarks that offer specific examples of the academic standards for grades K-8.

2. Curriculum Models that offer specific classroom strategies and assessment options for grades K-8.

The Frameworks, Benchmarks, and Curriculum Models are available on the Curriculum page of the Arkansas Department of Education's Web Site.

Refrigerator Curricula, grade specific documents, translate the standards into simple, non-technical language easily understandable to parents and the general public. The documents are available in English and Spanish and are posted on the Students link on the Arkansas Department of Education's Web page.

Professional Development

Since the state will hold schools accountable, sufficient opportunities for teacher and administrator professional development are made available to local districts.

Specific professional development programs that are available through the Arkansas Department of Education's K-12 Literacy and Mathematics Units include offerings such as:

- Literacy training in the use of a balance literacy approach, Early Literacy Learning in Arkansas (ELLA), Effective Literacy for Grades 2-4, and Multicultural Reading and Thinking (McRAT).

- Mathematics training in Demonstration Classroom Teaching/Collaborative Lesson Planning/Collaborative Teaching, Getting Your K-4 Math Program Off to a Smart Start, and Using CRT and SAT-9 Data to Improve Math Achievement

Statewide professional development opportunities continue to be available through state conferences, satellite delivered sessions, education cooperative workshops, professional books, videotaped series, email hotline and site visits.

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Reading and Mathematics Specialists are available to assist teachers and principals in implementing a standards-based system focused on reading, writing, and mathematics.

- Increased to 51 the total number of state literacy specialists.
- Increased to 16 the number of state K-6 mathematics specialists.
- Expanded the ADE mathematics unit.
- Increased to 10 the number of secondary mathematics specialists.

An expanded opportunity for schools to receive assistance in developing local character-centered teaching programs has been made available to all schools. Five Character-Centered Teaching pilots have been established and serve as demonstration sites. The schools are Corning High School, Corning School District; Eudora Middle School, Eudora School District; Gardner Primary School, Hot Springs School District; Lakewood Elementary, North Little Rock School District; and J. J. Izard Elementary School, Van Buren School District.

With the leadership of nationally recognized consultants, the five schools began the development and implementation of the Character-Centered Testing Model. These five schools form the core of the Arkansas Partnership that seeks to enhance the model and disseminate the Character-Centered Teaching Model to other schools and districts in the state.

On July 1, 2001, the ADE received funding to expand the character education initiative through the U. S. Department of Education's Partnership in Character Education Pilot Projects. The first year of the grant calls for an external evaluation of implementation in the five pilot schools. The results of the evaluation will be used to revise the professional development materials and create a handbook to be used in training and other dissemination activities. Additionally, training of a cadre of in-state trainers will help in staffing the expansion of the model up to 30 sites through a sub-grant process. Near to the end of the first year, a statewide conference will be held to showcase the partnership schools and disseminate information to interested schools/districts who may wish to respond to a request for proposal for funds to implement the Character-Centered Teaching Model.

The second year of the grant provides the opportunity for up to 30 sub-grants with a maximum amount of $20,000 for implementation of the Character-Centered Teaching Model.

Staff from the ADE will facilitate project management with support and technical assistance from Learning 24/7. The ADE will also provide the services of the Center for Performance Assessment led by Dr. Douglas Reeves, who will direct the evaluation activities, as well as conduct site visits and studies in each of the partnership schools.

The Office of Research, Measurement and Evaluation, established at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, assists the ADE and districts with data analysis and targeted technical assistance. The Educational Data Distribution System (EDDS) link on the ORME site provides the general public with access to aggregated student achievement information on the Primary (Grade 4) and Middle Level (Grade 8) Benchmark Exam. The information is available at the state, district, and school levels. The Web page address for ORME is http://orme.uark.edu.

An Educational Technology Unit has been established within the ADE's Information and Technology Section in order to conduct research and monitor and assist local districts in the use of technology. Academic achievement will be enhanced with the appropriate infusion of technology into the instructional process. This unit will assume responsibility for coordinating such efforts, taking advantage of the statewide network already in place.

Teacher licensure requirements for individuals entering the profession have been strengthened to better accommodate the higher demands of student achievement.

Student Assessment

Current law and State Board of Education Regulations require the administration of criterion-referenced tests (CRT) and norm-referenced tests (NRT).

Criterion-referenced tests are administered at Grades 4, 6 and 8 (Benchmark Exams), End-of-Course Exams in Algebra I and Geometry, and a Literacy Exam at Grade 11. The CRTs are aligned to the Frameworks and were developed by Arkansas teachers and the ADE. Norm-referenced tests (NRT), presently the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth edition (SAT-9) are administered at Grades 5,7, and 10.

Assessments	Grade Level	Month Administered
Criterion-Referenced		
Primary Benchmark	Grade 4	April
Intermediate Benchmark	Grade 6	April
Middle Level Benchmark	Grade 8	April
End-of-Course Literacy	Grade 11	April
End-of-Course Algebra	When Completed	January/May
End-of-Course Geometry	When Completed	January/May
Norm-Referenced	Grades 5,7, and 10	September

The State Board of Education has adopted General Performance Definitions for all of the state's criterion-referenced exams.

Primary and Middle Level Examination Definitions

Advanced: Advanced students demonstrate superior performance well beyond proficient grade-level performance. They can apply Arkansas established reading, writing and mathematics skills to solve complex problems and complete demanding tasks on their own. They can make insightful connections between abstract and concrete ideas and provide well-supported explanations and arguments.

Proficient: Proficient students demonstrate solid academic performance for the grade tested and are well-prepared for the next level of schooling. They can use Arkansas established reading,

writing and mathematics skills and knowledge to solve problems and complete tasks on their own. Students can tie ideas together and explain the ways their ideas are connected.

Basic: Basic students show substantial skills in reading, writing and mathematics; however, they only partially demonstrate the abilities to apply these skills. They demonstrate a need for some additional assistance, commitment or study to reach the proficient level.

Below Basic: Below basic students fail to show sufficient mastery of skills in reading, writing and mathematics to attain the basic level.

Performance scales of Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic have been created for the Benchmark Exams and End-of-Course Exams. In defining these levels of performance, a distinction has been made between adequate student possession of basic skills (Basic Level) and more complex abilities to apply basic skills in a variety of problem solving situations (Proficient Level). Such a scale gives more information to students, parents, and educators and is more meaningful than the former designations, especially with the new emphasis on student mastery of core knowledge and skills.

The performance scales are linked to those used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Such a linkage provides the best national comparison data available, since NAEP is the only assessment administered in nearly every state.

As another part of the student assessment program for Grades K-4, schools shall select performance assessments or screening/diagnostic tools to assess primary grade students. Personnel with expertise in literacy and mathematics shall develop and implement an academic improvement plan for each student not scoring proficient in reading and writing literacy or mathematics. The plan shall be based on ADE sanctioned early intervention strategies for Grades K-1 students and remediation strategies for Grades 2-4 students.

In addition, the state participates in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests at Grades 4, 8, and 12 and the Arkansas Educational Planning and Assessments System's EXPLORE at Grade 8 and PLAN at Grade 10.

Accountability

Accountability is a comprehensive, focused process designed to improve student learning. It is a shared responsibility of the state, school, district, public officials, educators, parents, and students. The accountability model focuses on each individual school and is constructed around a three-tiered system that includes statewide indicators, individual school improvement indicators, and a locally generated school accountability narrative.

Support

The "Poverty Index" is available to schools that have a high percentage of students in grades K-1 participating in the free and reduced meal program.

The ADE believes there are many variables that shape and determine the success of students attending public schools in Arkansas. Common sense tells us that the contributions parents make to a child's schooling is most important in determining the educational success of the child. However, it is known those children in poverty situations (home, school, community, etc.) face greater educational challenges. The Annie E. Casey Foundation reported that despite the healthy economy of the last several years, the proportion of children in poverty, 14.7 million or nearly 21%, has changed little over the past decade. It is noted that poor children are likely to lack nutrition, quality housing, and geographical stability, among other critical resources. Children who grow up poor are more likely to become teenage parents, drop out of school, and be unemployed as young adults. By contrast, families with greater resources are able to provide their children a far broader range of experiences, which increase their access to opportunities and help build confidence and aspirations to succeed.

According to data reported by the National Center for Children in Poverty, 27 percent of the children under age six in Arkansas live in poverty. The national average is 24.7 percent. Because our state leaders recognize the importance of educational opportunities for all children, a Poverty Index fund was established to help address the unique challenges faced by schools with a high concentration of poor children. Since poverty is a primary risk factor for student achievement, it is important that it be attacked directly. By recognizing poverty as a factor and not an excuse, schools are required to promote comprehensive strategies that address increased student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics in Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 1. These schools shall be held accountable for their efforts.

Uses of Poverty Index Funds:

The ADE wants to ensure that students are provided educational opportunities that are based on solid research, are linked to other successful school programs and activities, and make use of community partnerships that benefit students. Since it is critical that careful thought be given to the use of Poverty Index funds, the following shall be considered as guidelines for use of these monies:

1. All expenditures must have prior approval of the ADE.

2. All personnel hired must be certified or be highly qualified in the area he or she will work in the school program.

3. Funds shall be used for activities designed to increase student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics in Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 1.

4. Eligible activities include only those that are above minimum requirements of state law, education standards, Board of Education rules and regulations, and Department of Education guidelines.

5. Funds shall be used to benefit students in the targeted schools.

6. Funds may be pooled within a district or among districts.

7. Specific activities, subject to ADE approval, include:

    - Literacy and/or Mathematics Specialists
    - Literacy Coaches
    - Professional Development
    - Technology (purchase of computers and/or software)
    - Before and after school instructional activities
    - Extended school year instructional activities
    - Establishment, maintenance or expansion of Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 1 programs

Funding for the 1999-00 school year was based on $8.5 million distributed to schools with 75 percent or more of students in Kindergarten through Grade 1 participating in the free and reduced meal program. (Based on 10/1/98 K-1 enrollment. Source: ADE database.)

Funding for subsequent years will be based on minimum free and reduced price meal participation as well as school-by-school evaluation of how the funds have impacted student achievement.

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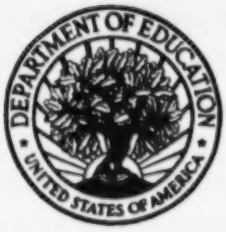

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